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**Interviews**  
**Nick Brandt**  
**Robert Swiderski**

**EndNotes**  
**Bill Jay**



Born in London in 1966, Nick Brandt was raised in England, where he studied painting and film at St. Martin School of Art in London.

In what he describes as “a previous incarnation in my twenties,” he was an award-winning director of music videos and commercials for the likes of Michael Jackson and Moby. He no longer directs, and prefers to focus his energies and conversation on his photography.

Beyond formal education or training, Brandt feels that travelling to experience other cultures offers a tremendous sort of informal education.

Photographically, he enjoys the early pictorial work of Edward Steichen, stating that “my mouth waters every time I look at those photos.”

Upcoming exhibits are scheduled at the Sandra Byron Gallery in Sydney, Australia (Oct 29 through Nov 23, 2005) and Camera Work Gallery in Berlin, Germany (Nov 26, 2005 through Jan 1, 2006).

Brandt lives with his wife, Orla, “and a menagerie of adopted animals” in Topanga Canyon (near Los Angeles).

**Web site:** [www.nickbrandt.com](http://www.nickbrandt.com)

**Book:** *On This Earth: Photographs From East Africa* (Chronicle Books, 2005, ISBN #0-8118-4865-5).

**Represented by:** Staley+Wise, New York; Stephen Cohen Gallery, Los Angeles; Photo-eye Gallery, Santa Fe; Debra Heimerdinger Fine Arts, San Francisco; Atlas Gallery, London; and Camera Work, Berlin.

**Works with:** Pentax 67 II with 120 film. Scans negatives to Apple G4. Dry darkroom work with Photoshop and Wacom Tablet. Prints with Epson 2200, 7600 and 9600 printers on Hahnemuhle (textured cotton rag) paper.

## INTERVIEW WITH NICK BRANDT

**Brooks Jensen:** I can't remember any photographs of African wildlife that is less “documentary” in feel than yours. There is a connection present in these images that makes them feel more like portraits than wildlife photography. Does this make sense?

**Nick Brandt:** Firstly, thank you very much for such lovely compliments. I've always felt that photographs of animals in the context of wildlife photography have been somewhat documentary. No one has approached it in the context of fine art photography. While 35mm cameras with motor drives and long lenses do a great job of capturing action, they miss the personality and soul of both the creatures and the place that they live in. Once I realized that I wanted to photograph these animals seriously, I went back to Africa with a Pentax 6x7. I've used it ever since. The aesthetic was clear from the very beginning. I started photographing the animals in the same way that a portrait photographer would photograph human beings. In other words, you wouldn't photograph a human being with a 500mm lens from 300 feet away and expect to capture their soul and personality. So in the same way, I'm trying to photograph these animals in very close, deliberate shots. I'm positioning myself – moving very, very slowly – and patiently waiting for the animals to present themselves for their portraits. In the wider shots I'm capturing them in the context of their world that moves me and enchants me so much.

- BJ: Was this a conscious decision before the photography started, or was it a discovery once you were there photographing?
- NB: In the beginning I wasn't consciously thinking *How am I going to do this differently than anybody else?* There are photographs in the book that are literally in the first few rolls that I ever took. There are two photographs in that book that are in the first ten rolls that I ever took. I know they were in the first ten rolls because I shot seventy rolls on my first trip and rolls eleven through seventy all got destroyed. Even those two photographs are flawed, which in an interesting way contributed to their aesthetic of feeling like a bygone era. They are actually quite damaged negatives. Often you will hear of photographers or painters or filmmakers who weren't consciously trying to be different. It came out that way fortuitously.
- BJ: I see a lot of Yousuf Karsh in your compositions.
- NB: Well, thank you. That's so funny that you mention it. I never planned to become a photographer. I was always interested in photography and when growing up I would print photos in the darkroom to study
- 35mm stuff. The very first poster that I ever put up on my wall was for an exhibition of Yousuf Karsh's work.
- BJ: Usually photographs of wildlife tend to be in color. Yours are all black and white.
- NB: Yes. Again, so much portraiture of human beings or landscape work is black and white – so why not animals? Africa has more dramatically extraordinary skies than anywhere else I've been in the world. Would this work better in color? In some senses yes. What I'm trying to do is give a feeling that this is a vanishing world. Sometimes the images look like they are from a bygone era. If they were in color that would completely destroy that sensibility. So often people say, "These feel like they are photographs from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century or the 19<sup>th</sup> century." That's good – these animals are disappearing, so if they feel like they're from a bygone era that's the right feeling.
- BJ: Many of your images have a dream-like, or even vintage quality to them. Does this just happen unconsciously or do you do it purposely?
- NB: No. When I would get the negatives

- back some of them would look that way. Would I then take them further into that feeling? Yes. In the first ten rolls that I ever shot, the film was damaged as a result of my camera being broken. It already felt old. I simply went further with it in the printing. It's not a willfully conscious thing – if I see it then I take it further.
- BJ: This tends to create a romantic view of Africa.
- NB: Yes. I have no interest in photographing, for example, kills. All I see is the torture and pain of the animal that is being killed. I just drive away. It's not what I want to capture. Is there a danger that I am romanticizing the world? Perhaps. We'll see what people say. I want to photograph the beauty and dignity and personality of these animals. There are a million and one other photographers who can take action photographs of other stuff. I just want to capture the animals in a state of *being* rather than in action.
- BJ: I suppose you are carrying on a tradition that has its roots in traditional arts like classic painting – where the world is presented in its glory rather than in its reality.
- NB: That's a good point. No one would ever say to Cézanne, "Why did you always paint that beautiful hill, why didn't you paint that ugly hill that's been stripped of all the trees?"
- BJ: I also suspect your images could be accused of being overly anthropomorphic. So many of these images have captured a look directly into the animal's eyes that make us feel that they are emoting on an almost human level.
- NB: It's an interesting point you raise. I would say very strongly that I am not anthropomorphizing. Animals have many similar emotions to humans and I'm simply capturing animals with their *emotions*, rather than showing an animal that is doing something similar to what human beings do. Descartes, the 17th Century French philosopher, stated that animals are just emotionless machines. This became a widely held philosophy for many centuries. It's just absurd. Any pet owner will tell you that animals are not emotionless.
- BJ: You make digital prints, so I'm assuming that you are using Photoshop. Are you doing any content manipulations in these images?

NB: No. But, Photoshop is the best darkroom in the world. I started in the darkroom and I quit about six months after I started photographing this body of work. The reason why I think Photoshop's the best darkroom in the world is not for the fakery that one can do, but the grading – the control over light and shadow, dodging and burning. For example, if you have a 7-stop range with some film in the darkroom, you'll have a 15-stop range in Photoshop. Those elephants are super-dark; there is a 6-stop difference between their bodies and the sky. With Photoshop I can safely underexpose the elephants by 3 stops so the sky's not bleached out, and then pull back all of those details in the shadows. You get an incredible range in the print of these dramatic skies, with all of the details in the elephant's hide. Everything that you see on the negative is there. The animal in the environment – they belong together.

I've been frustrated when I can't get the animal in the right place at the right time – there's this amazing landscape, but the animal is over *there*. What I've realized is that my imagination cannot come up with anything better than what I'm seeing in front of me. If I were to

concoct a composite in Photoshop it wouldn't be as good. I leave it to incredibly hard work, the frustration, and the serendipity of what will appear in front of me.

I've played around with the staining and the borders in Photoshop – just pushed what's already there. In the case of Polaroid negatives I've deliberately let the chemicals get old and cruddy, and then superimposed that on the image in Photoshop. The actual integrity of the underlying image of the animal within the landscape is all there on the negative.

BJ: I'm assuming that you are familiar with all the controversy that surrounded Art Wolfe when he pasted-in extra zebras to create a better composition for his book? You're not doing anything like that ...

NB: No. In the *Elephant Exodus* panoramic photos I made two quick exposures, and then merged them to make the panorama. If I'd had a Fuji 6x17 I could have gotten them all in one frame. I don't have any ethical problem with this at all because I haven't repeated any of the elephants. That is a straight click-as-fast-as-you-can with a medium

format camera. All of those elephants you see were actually there.

BJ: Although we don't generally get into the technical aspects of things I did want to ask you about your printing. I know that you are doing digital printing. You're one of the few photographers that I know who are unabashedly unashamed of that at this point.

NB: I was in Santa Fe for the opening of my show and there was a jury of gallery owners who each year see photographers' portfolios. They were telling me that two years ago only about five percent of the portfolios were digital, and this year they said it was closer to ninety percent. I think that it's part of the future. The timing has been perfect for me. I couldn't have started this with digital prints even a year or two earlier because the pigment inks weren't there. With the right combination of paper, inks and protective spray on the glass we can get prints that are expected to enjoy a longevity in excess of 150 years.

BJ: You're embracing the digital workflow in a hybrid form in the sense that you're still shooting film in the field.

NB: Let me just say I cannot see a time yet when I won't. I'm really not that interested in the digital capture of images. The incredible latitude of a black and white negative seems greater than anything I could get with digital capture – and I can then pull the details out of those highlights and shadows with Photoshop. Second of all, I would miss the absolutely stomach-churning aspect of never knowing quite what I'm going to get. That sometimes leads to wonderful surprises that I did screw up, and I did accidentally overexpose, and I did accidentally fog the negative, and I did accidentally do this that or the other. I have quite a few photographs that are far better because I screwed them up. So is there a potential case of the dull perfectionism of digital? Maybe digital photographers would be offended that I would say that. It's not fair for me to say that because I haven't actually tried working with a digital camera. In spite of all the stomach-churning neuroses that goes with being out in the middle of Africa – every trip I have cameras break and I'm unaware that I'm losing shots that I think I have – I would still choose film. The medium format is essential. I wouldn't even think about shooting 35mm. If I could shoot



8x10 negatives, I would. It's already insanely impractical what I'm doing.

BJ: It is interesting how you've managed to find this hybrid form. For example, your most valuable Photoshop tool is your *feet* – because your general approach is to get close, close, close and closer. That's interesting...

NB: Also, its important to emphasize how many people say to me, "Is all that blurring done in Photoshop?" No – it's all on the negative. You couldn't imitate those shifting planes of focus in Photoshop.

BJ: So how did the book come about?

NB: I just wanted to get published as fast as possible.

BJ: So you approached Chronicle?

NB: Yes.

BJ: Are you pleased with the results?

NB: The book has come out very well. Chronicle has great distribution, so hopefully it's going to be seen by a broader audience than your average fine art photography book.

BJ: Did you provide them the scans?

NB: We did some tests. I gave them my scans and we also did scans from the prints. Not surprisingly, their duotone separations from my scans were sharper, and the tonal transitions were better. The book was printed computer-to-plate, which is becoming more common in the industry. It's much sharper and crisper.

BJ: I think the tone you've got in the book is really terrific.

NB: It's interesting when you're deciding on the sepia tone because there is a tendency to overdo it and go too sepia. It can look a little cheesy. I like the sepia tone we achieved in the book because it's there, but not excessively there.

BJ: It's earthy and has that three-dimensional presence that you get with warm-toned prints that you don't get with neutral-toned prints. The only thing I wondered about is why some of the images in the back of the book were cool-toned?

NB: The blue ones? When thinking in terms of sepia-tone and cyanotypes, it's such an instinctive thing. There was something about those five images that I thought sepia just wasn't right. The blue tones gave the

images a kind of nocturnal African mid-summers night's dream quality. If you look at them carefully, you'll see that four out of the five are infrared images. There's that wonderful blossomy-quality that the infrared does to the leaves that makes it all the more moonlit. It just works better. My favorite is *Giraffe and Baby Under Trees* and I cannot imagine that as sepia, well I can because I've seen it as sepia and it doesn't work. It needs to be that blue.

BJ: So how many trips have you made to Africa now?

NB: The book constitutes four years' worth of work, with about eight trips over the course of five months.

BJ: How long are you actually photographing in each one of these trips?

NB: They tend to be between three to six weeks at a time.

BJ: So by now you're becoming very familiar with the territory and the turf and how to do this successfully...

NB: Yes, but it also gets harder and harder. There has been such incredible serendipity with some of these

images. For example, the *Cheetah and Cubs* photo was the very first frame on the very first morning, five minutes after sunrise. I then proceeded to spend one week with them, and then went back for another trip and hung out with them. I never got anything better, and I kind of don't expect to.

I've been down every bend in the Mara River and made the photo of the hippos there. The river's composition has the quality of a 17<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch landscape painting. I think there are certain territories in Africa that are the best to photograph animals in, and I know them. It's going to get harder.

BJ: There are always other projects that you can explore, too. Your fascination is not just African animals, but animals in general, is that right?

NB: Yes. I'm very intent on photographing that which moves me the most – especially because it's disappearing so fast. Of course, it's disappearing so fast everywhere else. Aside from the fact that I'm so moved by the landscape and the mythical-iconic nature of the animals in Eastern Africa, I can also get close to them. I can get close to them since they are relatively accustomed

to humans because of eco-tourism – which has huge pros and not a lot of cons. The tourism really helps the economies of those places and therefore they make more efforts to stop the poaching. If you go out of the areas where the tourists are the poaching is terrible. Then again there is the World Heritage sight in Ngorongoro, Tanzania, which is being overrun with tourists and somewhat destroyed. If I go to other parts of the world I'm not going to be able to get so close to the ani-

mals. As I've said in the Afterword in my book, I consider animals sentient creatures, equally worthy of life as humans. So I should be photographing *all* animals. I should be photographing my pets. I should be photographing factory-farmed animals – because they suffer such abuse and torment in their short, miserable lives. I should be capturing all of these animals – all their souls – but right now I'm concentrating on this.



# ON THIS EARTH

*Photographs from East Africa*



by

*Nick Brandt*

Nick Brandt

















